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**Subject:** RE: Obit for Ruth Gruber, David Michael's mom

Amazing person. David comes from strong stock

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**Personal Matters / Ex. 6**



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**From:** Sass, Jennifer [mailto:jsass@nrhc.org]  
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**Subject:** Obit for Ruth Gruber, David Michael's mom

Dear Friends,

Really great article in the Washington Post today about David Michael's mother, Ruth Graber, who passed away yesterday afternoon at 105 yrs old.

Warm regards,  
Jen

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/ruth-gruber-who-accompanied-1000-jews-to-the-shores-of-the-united-states-during-the-holocaust-dies-at-105/2016/11/17/da16277c-ad12-11e6-8b45-f8e493f06fcd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/ruth-gruber-who-accompanied-1000-jews-to-the-shores-of-the-united-states-during-the-holocaust-dies-at-105/2016/11/17/da16277c-ad12-11e6-8b45-f8e493f06fcd_story.html)

**Ruth Gruber, who  
accompanied 1,000 Jews  
to the shores of the  
United States during the  
Holocaust, dies at 105**



Dr. Gruber waves from the deck of the Henry Gibbs in August 1944. (Courtesy of David Michaels/U.S.

Ruth Gruber, an American journalist who stumbled into one of the great rescue stories of the Holocaust when the U.S. government appointed her to escort nearly 1,000 Jews across U-boat infested waters to the shores of the United States, died Nov. 17 at her home in Manhattan. She was 105.

Her son David Michaels, assistant secretary of labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, confirmed the death.

In an era when many female reporters were writing for the social pages, Dr. Gruber, as a photographer and reporter, was a dynamic exception.

Working for the New York Herald Tribune, she was the first Western journalist to visit the Soviet Arctic and the gulag.

In 1947, she watched as a ship carrying 4,000 Holocaust survivors and displaced persons was turned away from Palestine. She photographed and later chronicled those events in a book that Leon Uris used to write his best-selling novel "Exodus."



Dr. Gruber in her apartment in New York in 2008. (Jin Lee/Bloomberg News)

When Nazi officials stood trial in Nuremberg, she was there to report on the events.

But it was her transatlantic ship ride with the European refugees — a journey that she recorded in her 1983 book “Haven,” which became a CBS miniseries starring Natasha Richardson — that remained the defining act of her life.

“Standing alone on the blacked-out deck,” she wrote in her memoir “Inside of Time,” “I was trembling with the discovery that from this moment on my life would be forever bound with rescue and survival.”

It was in 1944, a year before the war’s end, that President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided to grant temporary asylum to a group of the 36,000 refugees housed in Allied camps in Italy. They would depart from the port of Naples, traverse the ocean in the ship the Henry Gibbins and live until the end of the war at an Army camp in Oswego, N.Y.

At the time, 32-year-old Dr. Gruber was working as a special assistant to Interior Secretary Harold Ickes in a brief interlude to her journalistic career. In “Inside of Time,” she recalled the fateful conversation with her boss:

“Mr. Secretary, these refugees are going to be terrified — traumatized. Someone needs to fly over and hold their hand,”

“You’re right,” Ickes responded. “I’m going to send you.”



Refugee youths pose in a dining room at Fort Ontario. (Courtesy of Dr. David Hendell/U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Some people considered the assignment too dangerous for a woman. Among them was Dr. Gruber’s mother, who came to Washington and confronted Ickes the morning of her daughter’s departure, demanding to know how he was going to keep her safe.

Ickes said that he was providing Dr. Gruber with papers naming her a “simulated general” so that she would be treated as such an officer, in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, if the ship were intercepted during the trip. It was enough to reassure her worried mother.

When Dr. Gruber arrived in Naples to meet the refugees, some were surprised to find that the liberator who stepped off the truck emblazoned with a Star of David was a woman. One man said that he couldn't tell Dr. Gruber how they had ended up in her custody, their stories being too much for a lady to take in. Try to forget that she was a woman, she asked him.

Some people had trouble imagining how Dr. Gruber would board the ship. She once recalled her conversation with the lieutenant of the launch boat that took her to the Henry Gibbins:

"You can't climb a Jacob's ladder in that outfit," he said, referring to her white skirt suit, white gloves and red straw hat. "Not with a thousand refugees and a thousand wounded soldiers watching."

At the lieutenant's orders, the Baltimore Sun reported, a seaman offered Dr. Gruber his pants.

Aboard the ship, Dr. Gruber assumed the only rank that commands more respect than general: that of a mother. The refugees, some of them too old to walk, actually called her "Mother Ruth." Fluent in German and Yiddish, she organized English lessons, cared for the seasick and taught at least one refugee her first English song — "You Are My Sunshine," the Boston Globe reported.

Together they made the two-week journey without attack, and the refugees arrived in the United States "safe beyond their most roseate dreams," according to a New York Times account at the time. But they were hardly sure of what awaited them. As a condition of their entry into the United States, they had to sign contracts promising to return to Europe at the end of the war.

Haunting photographs show the refugees en route to Oswego: a woman in a headscarf weighed down by her bags and staring straight into the camera; a bald, gaunt man averting his gaze; smiling young girls clutching their dolls.

For many of the refugees, Dr. Gruber was the only familiar face at their new home in Oswego. Her job could have been done when they arrived, but she did not



abandon them. She was a leader among the advocates who, after Roosevelt's death, successfully lobbied President Harry Truman to allow the refugees to stay in the United States.

Until the end of her life, Dr. Gruber remained convinced that the United States could have saved many more.

"I wanted to shake the country by the lapels and say, 'How can we let this go on?'" she told the Madison (Wis.) Capital Times in 2007. " 'How can we let this happen?'"

As for her own life, the prediction that Dr. Gruber made on the deck of the Henry Gibbins turned out to be right: It was all about rescue and survival.

The Exodus refugees never faded from her mind; decades later she said that she still ran into the occasional person who had been aboard the ship as a child. In her 70s, she was the only foreign correspondent to observe Operation Moses, the airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel during famine.

In "They Came to Stay," a book she co-authored with an American woman who had adopted daughters from Korea and Vietnam, she wrote about the heartbreak that may arise when people are taken from their homes, even in the name of a better future.

Ruth Gruber was born in Brooklyn (the "shtetl" of Williamsburg, she called it) on Sept. 30, 1911, to Russian Jewish immigrants.

From a young age Dr. Gruber defied convention: She graduated from high school at 15 and from New York University at 18. After earning a master's degree in German literature, she went to Germany and, at age 20, earned a doctorate from the University of Cologne with a dissertation on the author Virginia Woolf. The New York Times reported at the time that she was the youngest German doctor of philosophy.



Living in Germany allowed Dr. Gruber to see the nascent Nazi forces up close; describing the experience of attending one of their rallies, she wrote that her heart was beating so loudly that she feared an S.S. officer would hear it.

After her studies, Dr. Gruber jumpstarted her journalism career with a Guggenheim fellowship to study women living under communism. Her reportage from Alaska, not yet a U.S. state, caught Ickes's attention and helped convince him to hire her to work for the Interior Department, the job that led her to the Oswego refugees.

During her tenure as a government official, Dr. Gruber had a knack for attracting charges of communism — as well as colorful defenses of her patriotism.

In 1941, when she had been asked by the Interior Department to survey the economic conditions of Alaska, the House voted to remove her from the government payroll after a congressman charged that her 1939 book "I Went to the Soviet Arctic" was "full of Communistic innuendoes," The Washington Post reported at the time.

In a dramatic display, the accusing congressman read aloud the book's closing lines, an elegy for Alaska in which Dr. Gruber expressed her desire to one day swim again in the Arctic Ocean.

"That's enough for me," he was reported to have said.

To which another congressman shot back:

"The only thing she said is she wants to take a bath."

Dr. Gruber found her name in the newspapers again in 1949, this time in connection with a Justice Department employee on trial for espionage. Among the documents found in the woman's purse was one referring to Dr. Gruber as a reported contact of a Soviet embassy official.

"If that's a test of the accuracy of the FBI, they better disband," Ickes told the Associated Press. "If she's a Red, I'm a Hottentot."

Dr. Gruber's first husband, Philip H. Michaels, died in 1968 after 18 years of marriage. Her second husband, Henry Rosner, died in 1982 after seven years of marriage. Survivors include two children from her first marriage, David Michaels of Bethesda, Md., and Celia Michaels of London; two stepdaughters, Jeri Drucker and Elaine Rosner-Jeria, both of New York City; nine grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren. Another stepdaughter, women's health activist Barbara Seaman, died in 2008.

She was believed to be survived by fewer than 100 of the former refugees, according to a spokeswoman for the Safe Haven Museum and Education Center in Oswego.